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(CHARLES H. E. BROOKFIELD.)

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26, SOUTHAMPTON STREET,
STRAND.

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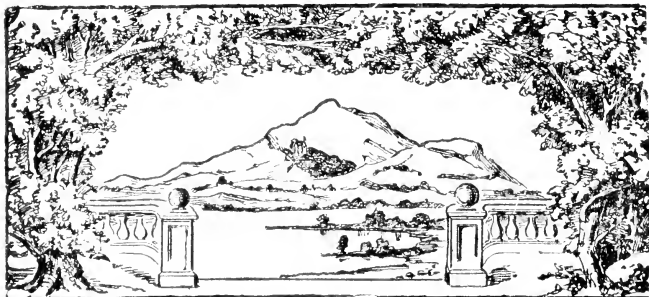
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AN EXCELLENT RECEIPT

1911

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AN EXCELLENT RECEIPT

First performed by Royal Command at Marlborough House on March 7th, 1908.

SIR WALTER ARMADALE . . . CHARLES HAWTREY

LADY ARMADALE. IRENE VANBRUGH

JOYCE (*Lady Armadale's maid*) . . . MONA HARRISON

SCENE.—LADY ARMADALE'S *drawing-room in Plantagenet Mansions.*

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AN EXCELLENT RECEIPT

SCENE.—*A cosily furnished drawing-room. It is about 1 a.m. JOYCE is sitting up for her mistress, reading a fairy tale.*

JOYCE. "So they got married and they were crowned King and Queen. And they lived together happily ever after. And Heaven blessed them with a beautiful little Prince every year." (*She puts down the book.*) Ha! That's all very well in fairy stories, but it's not real life. Look at Sir Walter and her ladyship. They married years ago—but they didn't live together happily very long. And Heaven didn't bless them with no little Princes. . . . Sir Walter soon went off his way, and she hers. Same address, "Plantagenet Mansions"—but him in one flat and her in another. United in the eyes of the world, yet hardly on speaking terms. What a way to live! If it was *me*, I'd apply to the Court for redistribution of conjurer's rights.

(*Electric bell.*)

There's her ladyship! (*Going to the door.*) I do hope she'll go straight off to bed and not sit up gossiping till the milk comes, like she does sometimes.

(*Exit JOYCE and enter LADY ARMADALE, almost immediately followed by JOYCE.*)

LADY ARMADALE. Here I am at last, Joyce. Aren't you dreadfully sleepy?

JOYCE. Oh no, my lady, thank you kindly. It's only just gone one.

LADY A. I'm so sorry I didn't take my key and tell you not to sit up. But you can go to bed now. I can manage without you.

JOYCE. Shan't I just help you undress, my lady?

LADY A. No, thank you.

JOYCE. I'd sooner just undo you, at all events, my lady, and put you into your *peignoir* and slippers—I would really.

LADY A. No—no. Go to bed at once. The fact is, Joyce, I'm expecting a visitor——

JOYCE (*surprised*). A visitor, my lady?

LADY A. Yes. I *rather* think Sir Walter may look in——

JOYCE (*excitedly*). Sir Walter? You *don't* mean that? Oh, my lady—hadn't I better stop and protect you?

LADY A. (*amused*). Protect me, Joyce? What from?

JOYCE. Well—you never know, with husbands. It's years since you've met him *tête-à-tête*, isn't it, my lady? You don't know how he mightn't behave. He might be voilent.

LADY A. Nonsense, Joyce—go to bed——

JOYCE. Very good, my lady. (*Going.*) What time would you wish to be called?

LADY A. You needn't call me. I'll ring—good-night, Joyce.

JOYCE. Good-night, my lady.

(*Exit* JOYCE.)

(LADY ARMADALE, *affecting to be calm, hums a little air. She opens the door into the passage—pauses a moment to listen—then pushes an easy chair before the fire and settles into it with a book, pretending to read, but every now and then listening to hear if there is any one at the door. Presently a gentle tapping is heard. She throws down the book and begins to rush gladly to the door, then checks herself*

and advances more soberly. She opens the door on the chain.)

LADY A. Who is there ?

SIR WALTER (*without*). It's I—Walter—will you be so very obliging as to let me come in ? I'll explain why——

LADY A. (*coldly*). Very well. (*She undoes the chain and admits him.*)

(*Enter SIR WALTER ARMADALE, he has his latch-key in his hand. They come down stage.*)

SIR WALTER. I don't know how to apologize enough for disturbing you in this outrageous way. The fact is—something happened to my latch—or my key. I can't get the door of my flat open——

LADY A. Well ?

SIR W. Well, it's rather late to go off to a hotel—and then, I've no luggage, of course. So I thought, perhaps—er——

LADY A. Yes ?

SIR W. I thought perhaps you'd be so extraordinarily kind as to allow me to—er—to bivouac on your sofa, here, for a few hours——

LADY A. Surely you can ring up your servants ?

SIR W. There's no one there. I've given the maids a holiday. I'm only passing through town. I was in Hampshire last week with the Wildey Wests, and I'm shooting at old Harry Muffet's in Norfolk to-morrow, and I sent Packham down there to-night with my things and a couple of spaniels. Old Harry's short of dogs. I've got to be at Liverpool Street at 8 a.m., and so——

LADY A. (*coldly*). Well—if you've nowhere else to go, I suppose there can be no great objection to your resting here on the sofa until it's time for your train. Shall you need a rug or anything ?

SIR W. Oh no, thanks. It's delightfully warm

in here. It's most awfully good of you to allow me to stay——

LADY A. Not at all. I don't see that I have any alternative. (*She seats herself again in the chair by the fire, with her back to SIR WALTER, and resumes her book.*)

SIR W. (*after a pause*). How pretty you've made this room!

LADY A. (*over her shoulder*). I must ask you, if you please, not to presume upon the situation which circumstances have brought about. The temporary shelter which I have been constrained to extend to you involves no social obligation—on either side.

SIR W. (*staggered*). What on earth d'you mean?

LADY A. I mean—don't talk. As soon as I've finished this chapter I shall go to my room. (*She resumes her book.*)

SIR W. Well, but—very well. I suppose I must do as you tell me. Still, it seems almost a pity we shouldn't avail ourselves of this extraordinary opportunity for a quiet chat. We haven't had such a chance for years, and we may never have such another, so that——

LADY A. Since you won't let me finish my chapter in peace—I'll leave you. (*Closes her book and rises.*)

SIR W. (*starting forward*). No, don't—*please*, Winnie! Not just this very instant——

LADY A. What possible good can come of a "quiet chat" as you call it, at *this* stage in our career? Didn't we have one over two years ago—before we agreed upon our present *modus vivendi*, our "live and let live" arrangement?

SIR W. So far as I remember, that was hardly a *quiet* chat, was it?

LADY A. I think so—as far as I was concerned, at all events—I hope you don't suggest, do you, that our discussion degenerated into a brawl?

SIR W. A brawl? Good heavens—no! But, if I recollect rightly, I think I had a few burning words

to say on the subject of that infernal Italian organ-grinder with whom you were pleased to become infatuated——

LADY A. (*aside*). He's *still* angry, bless him! *Darling* old Walter! (*Aloud—coldly*.) To speak of Signor Consordino, the celebrated virtuoso, as an "organ-grinder" and of my appreciation of his genius as "infatuation" is an impertinence—and, in present circumstances, a cowardly impertinence.

SIR W. Well, but——

LADY A. It is not often that I have had to reproach you with remembering that you are my husband——

SIR W. My dear Winnie——

LADY A. But if you can't behave courteously like a—like a stranger, I shall have to ask you to await the 8 a.m. elsewhere.

SIR W. Pray forgive me—I'm absolutely in the wrong. I had no right to rake up the infernal past——

LADY A. I beg your pardon?

SIR W. I mean—the blessed past. Blessed at first, that is—it became gradually infernal.

LADY A. Through whose fault?

SIR W. Oh, through mine, I admit. That's to say, to start with.

LADY A. "To start with"!

SIR W. In the first instance, I was wrong to pay even the little attention I did to—to a certain lady.

LADY A. "Certain" lady, indeed! *I* should have called her a very doubtful lady.

SIR W. I can only assure you that as far as *I* was concerned.——

LADY A. That's not the question. It was a slight upon me that you should have chosen to *afficher* yourself with that—Miss Sadie Hardbaker—wasn't her name?—an American chorus-girl.

SIR W. Pardon me, my dear. *Not* chorus-girl. She brought an action against the management, if

you remember, and the jury decided she was an actress.

LADY A. They hadn't seen her on the stage, had they?

SIR W. Well, no.

LADY A. Ah—I thought not.

SIR W. In any case—actress or no actress—she was a stranger in a strange land.

LADY A. Yet, by all accounts, she seemed to know her way about.

SIR W. (*ignoring the interruption*). You see, Americans are always so awfully polite and hospitable to English people who visit their shores, that when the "Little Miss Cute" Company came over here, I felt—I felt——

LADY A. You felt it behoved the gentlemen of England, as a matter of international courtesy, to take the extra ladies out to supper?

SIR W. Well, the fact is, when I was introduced to Miss Hardbaker, she happened to remark that she'd heard a lot about the Savoy Restaurant, but that she'd never been there.

LADY A. She was nervous, I suppose, and trying to make conversation. Yes? Go on.—

SIR W. I naturally at once begged her to do me the honour to let me be her *cicerone* and give her some supper there. You see, in America, a girl thinks nothing of being seen at a restaurant with a man.

LADY A. Yes, but, in America, what does the man's wife think about it?

SIR W. Oh—out there there's a much stronger spirit of *camaraderie* between the sexes than there is in this country. A wife is only too pleased if her husband has a good time now and again with some bright, merry companion of the opposite sex. And he, on the other hand, if he sees that his wife excites the frank admiration of other men, has the sense to appreciate it as a compliment to his good taste—he simply feels a glow of honest pride.

LADY A. And that mutual confidence is what you approve of?

SIR W. Certainly.

LADY A. And yet I can't remember your glowing with honest pride when poor Paulo Consordino complimented your good taste by frankly admiring me.

SIR W. (*furiously*). Don't dare to mention that coundrel's name. An infernal Italian Jew—with greasy black ringlets all over his shoulders——

LADY A. I'm sure he'd have shaved his head willingly, if I'd asked him.

SIR W. He wasn' even a flyer at his own job. He couldn't play for nuts.

LADY A. That's nonsense, Walter. Whatever you might think of him as a *man*, he was a divine musician.

SIR W. How you could be seen speaking to the wretch——

LADY A. Well, I think he gathered that you didn't much like us to be seen talking together. For on one occasion, if you remember, he *wrote* what he had to say.

SIR W. Don't remind me of that terrible evening. I saw him hand you a twisted-up note. I saw you secrete it and beam upon him as if he'd saved your life. When I desired you to show me what the brute had had the impudence to write, you refused to show it me.

LADY A. Certainly. If you'd asked me civilly I might, perhaps, have let you see it—although it was a privileged communication——

SIR W. (*boiling with rage*). "Privileged communication," indeed!

LADY A. But you stormed and raged and demanded it as a conjugal right. So that, as a matter of precedent, I felt I had no alternative but to refuse. Besides, you might have done him some mischief.

SIR W. Why should you wish to protect the brute?

LADY A. "A stranger in a strange land." Poor Paulo!

SIR W. (*furious*). I forbid you to call him "Paulo."

LADY A. (*coldly*). Really, Walter, I cannot allow you to adopt this tone. You must remember you are only in my room on sufferance.

SIR W. I can't help that. You shan't speak familiarly, in my presence, of the villain who wrecked my life.

LADY A. "Wrecked your life," indeed! You talk like a man in a melodrama. Your life was never wrecked, my dear. On the contrary, you got tired of fair-weather cruising in home waters, so you deliberately ran up the Black Flag, changed your course, and sailed off in search of adventures.

SIR W. Nothing of the kind. A fortnight of Miss Sadie Hardbaker's circumspect companionship had effectually quenched my thirst for adventures. At the end of that—bootless divagation, all my nerves stood out like porcupine's quills. The fragrance of her favourite scent made me sick. Her voice exasperated me like the twanging of a banjo. Her tales of histrionic triumphs—in three-line parts and three-inch bodices—held my attention no longer. Even at the witching hour of closing at the Savoy—when a man's heart is usually at its most susceptible—I ceased to be thrilled by her raucous whispers, redolent of cigarettes and *Crème-de-menthe*.

LADY A. In short, your enthusiasm having lost its sparkle you brought me home the lees—and felt aggrieved that I said "No, thank you."

SIR W. I came home like the prodigal son expecting forgiveness and welcome—but, lo and behold, the fatted calf had been already killed and served *à la Milanaise* to an infernal Italian interloper!

LADY A. (*half to herself*). *À la Milanaise*—that's rather funny! (*Aloud.*) Well, perhaps *I did* make rather a fuss of Consordino.

SIR W. Of course you did. Everybody noticed it. I wasn't the only one.

LADY A. I don't suppose you were. Indeed, you were probably the last.

SIR W. I tried hard to persuade myself that it was all on the surface—that you were simply moved by his music—that you admired the man merely as a musician. In fact, your friend Lady Hulda assured me she too felt convinced that was all.

LADY A. Had you consulted her?

SIR W. No. She came of her own accord and said how sorry she was to see all that was going on, but perhaps there was nothing in it.

LADY A. How very thoughtful of Hulda!

SIR W. It was, indeed. I shall never forget it.

LADY A. No more shall I. But—to revert to my conduct—I admit that I made the most of Con-sordino's devotion to me, that's to say that I purposely made it conspicuous to the world—not that I cared twopence about the poor little wretch, but simply——

SIR W. Simply to tease me?

LADY A. Tease you? No. To hurt you—to humiliate you—to spoil your appetite—to keep you awake at nights—to tear at your heart-strings—to make your life a misery to you.

SIR W. I don't see that that's anything to boast of.

LADY A. I know it isn't. I should never have dreamed of behaving in such a demoniacal way six years ago—when you first knew me. It wasn't in my nature.

SIR W. What changed you?

LADY A. The obvious reply is, "You did." But that wouldn't be quite fair. It was an impersonal you. It was the modern husband—who just happened to be you.

SIR W. What's the matter with the modern husband?

LADY A. There's not much harm in him—nor much good either.

SIR W. Then what's your grievance?

LADY A. Oh—every one resents being taken in.

SIR W. Taken in?

LADY A. Yes. Marriage is only our old friend the Confidence Trick—in a new guise. The bridegroom is the benevolent stranger who promises all sorts of benefits if you'll only trust him. The bride is the rustic who hands over crisp banknotes—and gets only tissue paper in exchange.

SIR W. My dear Winifred—my withers are unwrung. What did I ever promise which I didn't carry out?

LADY A. My dear Walter—don't assume such an *impossibly* virtuous air—or I shall imagine you're worse than you are. Nobody since the world began was ever *quite* so good as you look. It's the seraphic smile of the butcher when he's swearing he's never had a bit of frozen meat in his shop.

SIR W. But how do you allege the modern husband imposes upon his bride?

LADY A. By expecting so much more than he brings. By bringing so much less than she expects. To a nicely-brought-up girl marriage is the most sacred step in her life. Whereas with a man, marriage is merely an incident of departing youth—of waning vigour; a step towards middle-age. He takes a wife—with a shrug and a sigh and a half apology—just as he takes to Vichy instead of Champagne, or to driving a motor-car instead of riding to hounds.

SIR W. It was in no such spirit that I looked forward to my marriage with you, Winnie. I was over thirty when I first met you—and I'd knocked about the world like other men. But the instant our eyes met, I'd fallen headlong in love with all the ardour of a boy of twenty. I could think of no one else—talk of no one else. All day long I used to tear from place to place—the park, picture-galleries, concerts—

even tea-parties—on the chance to get a glimpse of you. And at nights I used to pace up and down under your window, to the keen suspicion of the policeman on beat. D'you remember my stealing that little miniature of you, set in crystals, off your mother's drawing-room chimney-piece?

LADY A. I know. That was disgraceful. Poor Rosalie was suspected and nearly got sent away.

SIR W. It was a most unjustifiable thing to do, I admit.

LADY A. "Unjustifiable" is a very mild word. It was distinctly dishonest.

SIR W. So it was. But I did so long for an effigy of you to help me over the hours when I had to be away from you—something to gaze at—to whisper loving words to—to cover with kisses——

LADY A. Why didn't you simply ask me for my photograph?

SIR W. I—I didn't know you well enough. We'd only met two or three times, you know. I remember your mother came in suddenly, as I was apostrophizing your portrait by the window—miles away from the chimney-piece. I felt I couldn't explain, so I—I pocketed it.

LADY A. You didn't confess your crime to me till months after.

SIR W. Not until after we were engaged.

LADY A. And I only forgave you on your solemn promise to wear my miniature as long as you loved me. "That will be for ever and ever," said you.

SIR W. (*about to speak affectionately—checks himself.*) That was my impression at the time.

LADY A. (*disappointed at his answer—with affected lightness.*) What's happened to my poor little portrait now?

SIR W. It's—it's put away.

LADY A. With loot from many another conquest, I suppose. (*Gives a little sigh.*) Well, it doesn't matter—since we're no longer lovers. I think I

must follow your example and start a museum of trophies too.

SIR W. I've no doubt you've a most interesting collection. Perhaps you'll allow me to inspect it some day?

LADY A. I'm not sure. I don't know how you'd behave. You might lose your temper. You see, however dead and buried a man's love for a woman may be, his *self* love remains immortal and ever young. However impassive a man may be, if you prick his vanity he'll shriek like a spoilt child.

SIR W. I suppose—amongst your treasured trophies—the note from Consordino will hold an honoured place?

LADY A. The historical communication which I refused to show you? Ah—I don't think I shall exhibit *that*.

SIR W. (*controlling himself*). Have you—have you still got it?

LADY A. How can you ask? Presumably it was worth keeping—or I surely shouldn't have made such a fuss about it.

SIR W. Where—where is it?

LADY A. It's—it's put away. Like my miniature.

SIR W. (*bursting forth*). "Like your miniature"? Do you dare to profane that sacred relic—embalmed as it is with all the sentiment of our early days of happiness—by comparing it with a garlic-laden *billet-doux*?

LADY A. I never said it was a *billet-doux*.

SIR W. What else can it be? What else do women secrete and treasure?

LADY A. Oh—lots of silly things.

SIR W. But what does the nature of the missive matter—since you treasure it for his sake. And now you boast that you actually wear it next your heart day and night and kiss it and weep over it—as I have done all these years with your miniature.

LADY A. (*delighted and surprised*). Why, Walter—

you don't mean to tell me that in spite of everything you still carry my portrait about with you—next your heart?

SIR W. Yes—like the weak fool that I am. But I'm cured of my folly at last. Since you prize the love-letter of that damned Italian—— (*He tears open his shirt and produces the miniature.*)

LADY A. Wait a moment, darling. Before you do anything desperate—you shall see the precious document. (*She goes to a drawer and takes from it a little twisted-up note.*)

(*Meanwhile SIR WALTER apostrophizes the portrait.*)

SIR W. Little oval face—little brown curls—little laughing eyes. You've beamed comfort upon me—times out of number when my loneliness seemed almost too much to bear. But I must wear you no longer since she whose face you recall has cast me out of her heart, out of her life——

LADY A. Come, Walter—don't talk nonsense. Is this the note you've been worrying about?

SIR W. That's it. I can swear to it—its spill-like form has haunted me for years. Am I to read it?

LADY A. If you please. It breathes of the Sunny South. It's given me a great deal of satisfaction—but you may destroy it now if you like—I've read it so often that I know it by heart.

SIR W. (*gives her a reproachful glance—then opens the note and reads*). "Put four ounces of good macaroni into a saucepan with three pints of boiling water. Boil for four minutes, not longer; stew the macaroni in a pint of good stock; add an ounce of grated Parmesan cheese, stirring well, and add a piece of butter the size of a walnut." Why, this is simply a receipt for macaroni!

LADY A. *À la Milanaise*—and an excellent receipt too. Consordino's father was cook at Ritz's Hotel, you know.

SIR W. And this—harmless formula has been the sole ground for all the misery I've endured?

LADY A. Apparently the acquaintance with the American *figurante* which so upset *me* was just as innocent.

SIR W. Yes, but—wasn't it a little unkind of you to let me suffer all this time—for nothing?

LADY A. Surely you'd have more reason for resentment if it *hadn't* been for nothing. But—believe me, darling—I've been quite as wretched as you can have been.

SIR W. My sweet Winnie!

(*They embrace—he catches sight of the clock.*)

SIR W. Good heavens! D'you know the time? It's nearly seven. My train goes at eight.

LADY A. Can't you—can't you send Harry Muffet a telegram?

SIR W. Of course I will, if I may. But there's loads of time for that. Do you realize, my darling, that—somehow or other—we've made it up? And to think that we owe all this to chance—to the chance which clogged the lock of my door!

LADY A. Shall I make a confession?

SIR W. What, darling?

LADY A. It wasn't chance—it was *I* who filled that lock with coal dust.

SIR W. My angel! (*He kisses her.*)

LADY A. Must I—must I send and have your door broken open?

SIR W. It may stay closed for ever now—unless you wish me to go?

LADY A. No, sweetheart—stay here—always.

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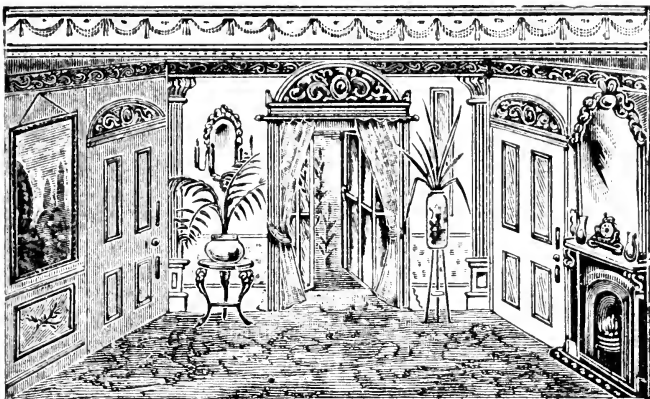
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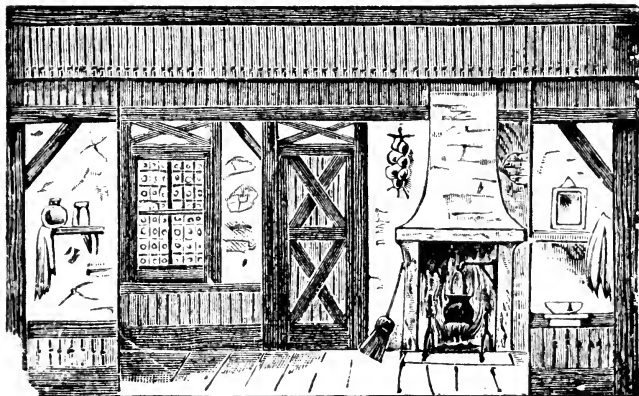
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